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REVISITING THE ROMAN CHURCH'S
TABLE PRACTICE

Mark Anthony Rodriguez

Abstract - The Roman church teaches that reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ is reserved only for those who have membership in the Roman faith. By examining the actions and parables of Jesus, this essay questions whether or not Jesus seems to have demonstrated an alternative purpose for his eucharistic meals.

And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God."¹

One could define "closed communion" as the practice of restricting the serving of the consecrated bread and wine of the Lord's Supper to those who are members in good standing of a particular church, denomination, sect, or congregation. Though the meaning of the term has varied slightly from tradition to tradition, it generally means that a church or denomination limits participation in the Supper of the Lord either to members of their own church, members of their own denomination, or members of some specific class within their church. The Roman church teaches

that reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ within its tradition is reserved only for those who have been baptized,² but even this mandate assumes that such individuals were in fact baptized in the Roman Church. Only after undergoing such a baptism and attaining what the church calls the age of reason – which Pius X defines in his 1910 decree *Quam singulari* to be “about the seventh year, more or less”³ – can one then present him or herself at the table of the Lord to receive Holy Communion.⁴

Regarding the Roman church’s table practice, Kevin Irwin writes in his book, *Models of the Eucharist*, that “the key issue in acts of (inter)communion is the degree of belonging to and participation in the church that sharing in the Eucharist presumes and fosters.”⁵ But, by examining his actions and parables Jesus seems to demonstrate an alternative purpose. Regarding the role table-fellowship played in earliest Christianity, Norman Perrin writes, “it is evident that the meals themselves were the important thing and not a theological purpose which they might be said to serve.”⁶ Hence, the purpose of this essay is to seek out what Jesus originally intended by his experience (as both guest and host) of table-fellowship, and more specifically, to ask whether such fellowship was truly meant to be exclusive. Did Christ intend to form a special club of intimate believers when he instituted the Eucharist “on the night he was betrayed,”⁷ or did his table rather form a fellowship of hospitality to which all have been invited and have their place?⁸

Social life centered around eating and drinking in the ancient world every bit as much as it does for people today,⁹ and this was no different for Jesus, the Son of Man, who like-

wise came “eating and drinking” (Mt 11:19). The scriptures often show Jesus eating at table and several times witness to how he likened the kingdom of God to the image of a great banquet “at which all those who enjoyed God’s favor would sit down together and feast in abundance.”¹⁰ Jesus’ table-fellowship did not set out to establish any rank or authority, for even he, as the master and teacher,¹¹ had come to serve. Luke writes, “Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he [the master] will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them” (12:37). And again, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10:45). Such a toppling of contemporary authoritarian social constructs finds its epitome in Jesus’ actions at the final supper recounted in the Gospel of John where he writes:

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. (Jn 13:2-5)

“The central feature of Jesus’ mission is the ‘holy’ or ‘wondrous exchange’ so often described by the Fathers.”¹² Irenaeus¹³ writes, “He gave his soul for our soul, his flesh for our flesh, pouring out the Spirit of the Father in order to achieve union and communion between God and man.”¹⁴ And, again, to paraphrase Athanasius,¹⁵ all men were condemned to death; but he, the immortal one, the innocent one, surrendered his body to death for all. Hence, all men, being dead through him are now freed from sin and are raised to new life: “his suffering for our incapacity for suffering,

his death for our immortality, his tears for our joy, his being laid to rest for our rising again, and finally, his baptism for our sanctification.”¹⁶ According to John O’Donnell, an interpreter of Hans Urs von Balthasar, “the Eucharist is the perfect embodiment of the *admirabile commercium* between God and man. The Church presents her emptiness to the Father, and she in turn is filled with Christ, the Bread of Life. And the bread which she eats is the Body which she becomes, Christ’s Body visible in the world.”¹⁷

Focusing once again on Jesus’ table-fellowship – that holy or wondrous exchange demonstrated throughout the New Testament – Bradshaw and Johnson comment, “One of the striking features of the recorded actions of Jesus [and his followers] is his apparent disregard for some of the established customs of the pious society of his day with regard to meals.”¹⁸ For examples, they point to Mk 7:1ff as well as to Lk 7:34 (parallel, Mt 11:19) saying “not only were his disciples criticized for eating with unwashed hands, unlike the Pharisees, but Jesus himself was described by his enemies as ‘a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’”¹⁹ But, Jesus does not shrink in the face of such accusations and continues to liken the kingdom of God to a great banquet (cf. Mt 22:2, & Lk 13:29, 14:15) while at the same time adding a “novel twist” as accounted in Bradshaw and Johnson: “Those regarded as outsiders would be invited while those expecting to have a place would be denied it (see, for example, Mt 8:11-12; Lk 13:28-29).”²⁰

By Jesus’ actions and words, “he was thus moving the boundary markers with regard to those whom his contemporaries deemed acceptable to God and challenging the conventional divisions within society.”²¹ Accord-

ingly, "his feeding miracles functioned as performative versions of this teaching, as symbolic anticipations of the future messianic banquet (Mt 14:13-21; 15:33-39; Mk 6:31-44; 8:1-9; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:5-15)."²² Norman Perrin writes, "Jesus' table-fellowship with 'tax collectors and sinners' is not a proclamation in words at all, but an acted parable," and it is precisely this "aspect of Jesus' ministry which must have been most meaningful to his followers and most offensive to his critics."²³

In Mt 11:16-19, Jesus says:

But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

According to Perrin, when Matthew writes that "the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" the evangelist gives two things that give offence to the authorities in Jesus' day: (1) his eating habits and (2) the fact that he is a "friend" of "tax collectors and sinners."²⁴ Perrin writes, "If we understand the phrase 'a glutton and a drunkard' to refer to Jesus' habit of holding table fellowship, and the 'friend of tax collectors and sinners' to refer to the people with whom he was prepared to hold that fellowship, then we have at one and the same time a matter of notable and noticeable offensiveness." If such things were not offensive, why would the evangelist feel the need to mention them, especially after just mentioning how the Baptist had likewise

offended the authorities of his day by doing the exact opposite?

Jesus desires that everyone come to his table for not ten verses later one sees him give his greatest and most well known invitation saying, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Here, Jesus opens his whole self to all, even sinners. And, if Jesus is truly present Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity in the consecrated bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, should not all likewise come and partake? Mark reminds us that Jesus has not come to call the righteous, but the unrighteous (cf. Mk 2:17). Holy things are not only for the holy, they are for the unholy as well, for could not a sinful man or woman after hearing the prayer of elevation and fraction in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, "Holy things for the holy people," echo the very words of the Syrophoenician woman, saying, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mk 7:28). Is this not why the very same liturgy has the people respond, "One is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father?"²⁵

But, Jesus does not stop here. He does not simply want to call sinners to the table, but everybody. His invitation, at least in Mt 8:11 (for one must recall the later parable of Mt 22 which will be discussed below) appears to be a universal invitation. In Mt 8:11, Jesus says, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." According to Perrin, "This saying definitely refers to the expected messianic banquet of the time of salvation, and it emphasizes the universalism that will be a feature of it."²⁶ For Jesus, table-fellowship was an anticipation of what was to be expected in the Kingdom (cf. Lk 13:29 given above, but especially LK 14:15 where it says,

“One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, ‘Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!’”). In this pericope, scribes, tax collectors, fishermen and Zealots will all gather together around the table of our Lord at which they will proceed to celebrate “the joy of the present experience and anticipate its consummation in the future.”²⁷

Regarding the role of table-fellowship in earliest Christianity, Perrin writes:

It is evident that the meals themselves were the important thing and not a theological purpose which they might be said to serve. The existence of such different theological emphases as those connected with the ‘Lord’s Supper’ in the New Testament (I Cor. 11) is an indication that the occasion has called forth the theologues, not the theologues the occasion. The practice of early Christian communal meals existed before there was a specifically Christian theology to give it meaning.²⁸

The only reason the early church persisted in holding Christian communal meals (eucharists) is simply because they were (and are) a continuation of something Jesus himself did.²⁹ Nathan Mitchell reminds his readers that Jesus sat at table “not as the charming, congenial, ringleted centerpiece of a Rembrandt painting, but as a vulnerable vagrant willing to share potluck with a household of strangers.”³⁰ Jesus did not only eat with objectionable persons – outcasts and sinners – he ate with anyone, indiscriminately.³¹

The fact that the church in Corinth did not observe this Christ practiced, indiscriminate table fellowship brought upon them a very harsh criticism by Paul when he wrote:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (I Cor 11:27, 30)

According to Bradshaw and Johnson, “this failure to recognize the fundamental equality of all and to share what they have with one another leads [Paul] to conclude that ‘when you assemble together, it is not to eat the Lord’s supper’ (1 Cor 11:20).”³² Hence, in order for one to eat the Lord’s Supper, he or she must do just the opposite. He or she must recognize the fundamental equality of all and share whatever he or she has with one another until Christ comes again.

In conclusion, when Jesus sat down at table he drew all manner of people to himself. All were welcome at his table. The Roman Church, however, still practices a closed table, one that is even closed to her fellow believers who just happen to be baptized within a different faith tradition. This seems contrary to Christ’s initial purposes for this sacrament. Many will say that the Church has always held a closed table, but in regards to baptized Christians, this is not true. It is true that after the great schism in 1054, Eastern Orthodox Christians could not receive the body and blood of the Lord at a Roman eucharist. But, according to the current Code of Canon Law, “Catholic ministers may [now] licitly administer the sacraments of penance, Eucharist and anointing of the sick to members of the oriental churches which do not have full Communion with the Catholic Church.”³³ Such a change came after the promulgation of the “Joint Catholic Orthodox Declaration of His Holiness Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I” on 7 December 1965 when it declared that:

They [Paul VI and Athenagoras I] regret and remove both from memory and from the midst of the Church the sentences of excommunication which followed these events, the memory of which has influenced actions up to our day and has hindered closer relations in charity; and they commit these excommunications to oblivion.³⁴

And so, once the excommunication was committed “to oblivion,” by virtue of their Trinitarian baptism, all Orthodox faithful could now receive Eucharist at a Roman Catholic liturgy.³⁴ Hence, the unifying (or communal) force between the two traditions is baptism. Such an understanding definitely follows after the traditional interpretation of the parable of the great wedding banquet in Mt 22:1-14 where a man is discovered not wearing a wedding robe. The king asks, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” But, the man is speechless. So, the king commands his attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” If all that is needed for one to remain at the banquet is a wedding robe, then our separated Protestant brothers and sisters possess this by merit of their Trinitarian baptism. Having “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:14), they have forever put on Christ (Gal 3:27). Might they now be invited to his table?

Notes:

¹ Revelation 19:9 (NRSV).

² “Code of Canon Law,” Vatican.va, accessed November 27, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P2T.HTM, 842 §1: “A person who has not received baptism cannot validly be admitted to the other sacraments.”

³ Pius X, *Quam singulari*, Papalencyclicals.net, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/pioquam.htm>. The church promulgated this teaching simply to ensure that those who present themselves to receive the consecrated bread and wine possess “some knowledge of this august Sacrament” (Pius X, *Quam singulari*). In other words, in order to receive Holy Communion rightly, one must attain the age when he or she “can distinguish between the Bread of the Holy Eucharist and ordinary bread” (ibid.).

⁴ The Code of Canon Law states that children who have reached the use of reason and who have been properly prepared be refreshed by the Church with this divine food “as soon as possible,” 914.

⁵ Kevin Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 87.

⁶ Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM Press; New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 104.

⁷ From Eucharistic Prayer III in *The Roman Missal: Study Edition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 729.

⁸ According to Pierre Lévy in his book, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World*, the refusal of fellowship or “hospitality” was Sodom’s crime. He writes, “Rather than welcome the strangers, the Sodomites wanted to rape them. Hospitality is the perfect representation of the maintenance of the social bond, one conceived in accordance with the formula of reciprocity: we are likely to be either the receiver or the received. And each of us may become a stranger in turn. Hospitality sustains the possibility of travel, of meeting the other. Through hospitality, he who is lost, different, foreign, is welcomed, integrated, included in a community. Hospitality is the act of attaching the individual to a community. In every respect, it is the opposite of exclusion.” Cf. *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World*, trans. Robert Bononno (New York and London: Plenum Trade, 1997), 26.

⁹ Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8-9. Cf. Mt 22:2, & Lk 13:29, 14:15.

¹¹ Cf. Lk 12:37 & Jn 13:14.

¹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1992), 237.

¹³ A second century Christian author ironically associated with espousing ultra exclusive views of what it meant to be a Christian based in his famous five volume work *Against Heresies*.

¹⁴ *Sancti Irenaei, Episcopi Lugdunensis et Martyris, Detectionis et Eversionis Falsa Cognominatae Agnitionis seu Contra Haereses, Liber Quintus*, in *Patrologiae Graecae*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, vol. 7b, Sancti Irenaei (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1857), 1121 (col. 292b, 16-17): «*Dante animam suam pro nostra anima, et carnem suam pro nostris carnibus, et effundente Spiritum Patris in adunitionem et communionem Dei et hominis*» (translation mine).

¹⁵ Again, another early Christian personality (fourth century) associated with espousing more exclusive views of what it meant to be a Christian due to his voluminous writings against the Arians.

¹⁶ *Sancti Patris Nostri Athanasii, Archiepiscopi Alexandrinum, De Incarnatione et Contra Arianos*, in *Patrologiae Graecae*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, vol. 26, Sancti Athanasii (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1857), 991/2 (col. 698A, 5): «*Non enim ut seipsum salvum faceret venit Deus, qui est immortalis; sed ut nos qui mortui eramus liberaret: neque pro se passus est, sed pro nobis: ita ut ideo nostram vilitatem inopiamque suscepit, ut nobis divitias largiretur suas. Passio (πάθος) enim ejus, nostra est impassibilitas (ἀπάθειά): mors (θάνατος) ejus, nostra immortalitas (ἀθανασία): lacrymae (δάκρυον) ejus, nostrum gaudium (ἡμετέρα): sepultura (ταφή) ejus, nostra resurrectio (ἀνάστασις), et baptismus (βάπτισμα) ejus, nostra sanctificatio (ἀγιασμός): nam Pro eis, inquit, ego sanctifico meipsum, ut sint et ipsi sanctificati in veritate*» (translation mine).

¹⁷ John O'Donnell, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: The Form of His Theology," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991), 218.

¹⁸ Bradshaw and Johnson, "The Eucharistic Liturgies," 8.

¹⁹ Ibid., 8.

²⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

²¹ Ibid., 9.

²² Ibid.

²³ Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 102.

²⁴ Ibid., 105.

²⁵ From "The Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom," in R. C. D. Jasper and G. J. Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 134.

²⁶ Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 106.

²⁷ Ibid., 107.

²⁸ Ibid., 104.

²⁹ Ibid., 104-05.

³⁰ Nathan Mitchell, *Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation*, Forum Essays 2 (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 89-90.

³¹ Ibid., 89-90.

³² Bradshaw and Johnson, "The Eucharistic Liturgies," 10.

³³ "Code of Canon Law," 844 § 3.

³⁴ "Joint Catholic Orthodox Declaration of His Holiness Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I," Vatican.va, accessed November 26, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651207_common-declaration_en.html, 4b.

³⁵ It is, however, important to note that such a gratuitous invitation on the part of the Roman Church has not been reciprocated by the Eastern Orthodox Churches. It is also important to note that the canon comes without any further qualification. Simply said, these Oriental Churches are Orthodox and thus have valid sacraments.